NO ESCAPE
LUKE 24:13-32

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What form does the psychological dynamic called "escapism" take in your life? In simpler terms, how do you get away from it all - not as an extended vacation, but weekly, daily, as part of your normal life style? Reading helps me to escape: so do the exploits of the Pittsburgh Pirates: a television show sometimes does the job: on occassion Johnny Carson serves as my escape, and it is interesting that he and the producers of his show know very well that this is their success formula. A late-night walk is good for escaping: or a motion picture. Although that can be risky given the new realism and social conscience of the movie industry. On more than one occassion I have gone to the theatre to escape only to discover that the movie itself forced me to confront the very issues and concerns from which I was seeking a temporary reprieve.

All of us have our own way of pulling back from life: our private escape valve that allows us a blessed hour or two apart from the pressures and tensions and deep, personal burdens we bear every day. And it is a good thing that we do. On this level escapism is normal and healthy and therapeutic. It is not uncommon for a doctor or counselor to prescribe a little play, a little diversion, a little activity that demands our physical energy and emotional resources as an antidote to anxiety and depression. We need to escape: we need to find ways that will allow us to practice responsible escapism.

Because there is an escapism that is irresponsible and unhealthy. One of the first signs of alcoholism is the need of the individual to drink in order to function, and the corresponding need to drink in order to escape from something. People drink heavily for a number of reasons and I claim no expertise, other than the common understanding that a problem drinker has come to lean on alcohol as the only way to get away from himself or life in general or whatever is bothering him. For the same reasons people turn to drugs - because under their influence enphoria is the norm and the pressing problems of life, the guilt and feelings of inadequacy all fade away, and everything is fine. And I don't just mean hard drugs: because the "gentle blue bill" will do the same thing for you. Drug induced escapism is

as close to all of us as the neighborhood pharmacy.

There are other expressions of unhealthy escapism not as dramatically obvious as alcoholism and drug addition. In a curious twist, escape for some people becomes work: rather than a source of tension, a person's job may become the escape valve from a marital situation that is intolerable. The compulsive worker who says he's trying to get ahead may just be escaping from the tensions and frustrations of home - at which point escapism is destructive.

On a personal level we need a degree of escapism. None of us is equipped to live in the eye of the storm twenty-four hours a day. But escapism turns unhealthy when it prevents us from dealing with the real issues of our lives: when we reach for the bottle of scotch or the tranquilizer bottle or go back to the office because there is nothing else to do.

On a broader level we engage in mass, cultural escapism. Every successive Oppolio mission has served this function in the National psyche. Following the progress of the mission allows us to get away for a while: and vicariously we are able to view the whole world as a blue-green sphere floating in space, and it's a good feeling. In the aftermath of the Howard Hughes - Clifford Irving incident one assayist suggests that we were fascinated by it all because it happened at very opportune time: namely as a pleasant interruption to inflation and food prices and Viet Nam and bussing: and we were quite saturated at the moment with all of that.

That can be healthy. That kind of cultural diversion can be therapeutic - until it becomes a substitute, an escape from reality. The Roman Emperous knew that a good circus would divert people's attention from the barbarian invasion in the North. So it is easy today to look for an escape from the pressing realities of our national life.

Escapism in its various forms, I would like to suggest, is the equivalent the Road to Emmaus in our New Testament lesson this morning. And according to that very significant story in the Gospel according to Luke, it is precisely on this road, this attempted escapism, that the divine breaks into our lives: that

when it happens it is a surprise - an intrusion - that cannot be nailed down: and that when it happens it may be ambiguous and not altogether clear. We may not recognize it at first.

With this in mind, let us look again at Luke's story. Jesus was dead, and now it was Sunday, the first day of a new week. On Saturday I can imagine the disciples together in their locked room, trying to come to grips with the unspeakable tragedy that had happened the afternoon before. I see them pacing back and forth, trying to make conversation, being a more solicitous than usual. But now Sunday, Jerusalem was returning to normal. Life was going on, and two of them decided to do a very logical thing: to get away for a while: to escape from the grief - the guilt because they had abandoned him - the unanswered questions - the deep doubts - the beautiful dream that had died with him. A few hysterical women had come to their hiding place clammoring about an empty tomb, and all that did was make the tension greater and the gloom thicker.

So they decided to walk to Emmaus: two of them, in order to escape. We are not told why they went: we know that Emmaus is just a few miles outside Jerusalem, that it was a very small settlement: and I am suggesting that for them the only thing Emmaus had going for it was that it wasn't Jerusalem and thus an escape.

You know the rest. As they walked they were joined by a third man with whom they talked about the events of the past several days. They persuaded the stranger to eat the evening meal with them in Emmaus. And when, at table, the stranger broke the bread, blessed it and gave it to them, they suddenly, remarkably recognized him. It was Jesus - alive and sitting right there with them. And then he left. In the process of escaping he came to them: in the most unlikely circumstances the divine broke in on their lives: and before they could nail it down, before they could draw a picture or write a poem, the experience was over. One fleeting moment of revealation: one moment of certainty: and then they were alone again.

I conclude from that something that I regard as very important: namely that Jesus Christ comes to us in the common experiences of our lives: that he comes to us specifically as we engage in our gentle escapism. I am inferring - and I mean to infer -

that you and I, and all men, try to escape from him: that to hear his call, to know the cost of discipleship, to sense that a claim has been laid on my life is to try to get out from under it. We have a whole bag of tricks: we doubt the historicity of the Biblical accounts: we can't swallow the resurrection: or we just can't be bothered because other matters are more important: or we find neat rationalizations why his command to love totally just isn't practical right now. And then he comes to us - a stranger - through the voice of another person - through the need of a hungry child - through the call to commitment and sacrifice.

We all have our roads to Emmaus: and one of the continuing themes of the Biblical witness is that God will not allow us to walk them alone. There is no escape. Centuries before Christ a Psalmist sensed this about God, and wrote it down in what for me has become one of the most suggestive and personally meaningful portions of scripture.

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to Heaven, thou art there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." (Psalm 139: 7:10)

The poet, Francis Thompson, called it "The Hound of Heaven" and wrote movingly about how, over the labyrinth of time, he sensed himself pursued, chased and found by God himself.

That's the first thing that I conclude: that whatever the Road to Emmaus is for us, Jesus Christ will keep breaking to walk with us: that there is no escape: that no matter how we try to ellude him, we will be found.

The second conclusion is that when it happens: when the certainty of God occurs in our lives, we will try but fail to nail it down permanently. At Emmaus Jesus Christ revealed himself to the two disciples and then left. But you and I want very badly to preserve those moments. We want to make normative the one experience of certainty

and grace. Some people come to worship every week expecting to be hit between the eyes with a sense of their own salvation. Some people want to "get high" on Jesus: to live constantly with the emphoric sense of God's presence. Some churches seem to know how to do it weekly and have made the moment of truth into an emotional upheaval that must be played and replayed again and again, as if its meaning would disappear if the experience is not repeated. And I want to say that, that too can be a form of escapism: that to demand regular authenticating of one's faith is, essentially, to escape from the reality of life: that the divine may break in as we walk to Emmaus, but that it is not honest to demand a whole life lived on this level.

I conclude, in the third place, that when the divine breaks in, when Jesus Christ comes to us, we may not immediately recognize him. That was the disciples' experience. They walked and talked with him for some time: they sat down at a table with him: presumably they looked right at him. And they didn't know who he was. What else could that mean but that Jesus Christ comes in ways that are not always obvious, and that do not necessarily correspond with our own expectation regarding our encounter with him. We have been taught, even though we may not subscribe to it intellectually, that Christian conversion happens in a certain way, that a religious experience will be manifested in certain feelings, that when God choses to confront us we will be as sure of it as anything that has ever happened to us. We associate it with the dramatic, unnatural occurence: the bolt of lightning, the mysterious vision. Biblically, we recall to burning bush for Moses, and the Damascus road for Paul: precise, crystal clear experiences of God's reality and God's will.

Most of us are not that fortunate. Nor were the two disciples at Emmaus. They recognized him in the breaking of bread: and so, I would suggest, God moves among us. Jesus Christ comes, I believe, mostly in the quiet, honest encounters between people: Jesus Christ appears as a stranger when something kind and surprising and beautiful happens: when someone says "I care about you" and means it: when someone says "I'm praying for you and does it"; when through the grace of God we are enabled to minister to and heal and help each other. He comes, I believe, when we break bread together and enjoy each other: he comes, I believe, in a child baptized affirming the mysterious

beauty of human birth and the compelling need for human love.

He comes, I believe, as we perceive the suffering of other people: he reveals himself in the broken bodies of the war dead, in the drawn face of a starving child, in the angry face of an oppressed black brother. There is no escape from that.

In the final analysis, the presence of Jesus Christ, is what we have to offer the world and each other. One commitment compells us to live for others, to heal the sick and feed the hungry. But when all is said and done, all we really have is the presence of Jesus Christ and the certainty of his presence in the world.

A group of clergymen met last week and as we broke bread together we were lamenting the lack of impact the church has on society, and the relative impotence of the combined churches in our own community. And the conversation turned to an experience we all shared - serving communion to the patients of St. Elizabeth Hospital on Maunday Thursday. To a man we were deeply effected by this strange role of offering the presence of Jesus Christ to people we didn't know. Many of us have received thank you notes from those people. And we concluded that in the final analysis this is what we are about as ministers, and this is what the Church is about - the sharing and celebrating of the presence of Jesus Christ.

Albert Schweitzer, among his many gifts, was a great scholar. He wrote a very sophisticated work which became one of the most influential books in the field of New Testament Scholarship - "The Quest for the Historical Jesus". But he ended his book on a deeply devotional note. I would like to read to you from the last paragraph of "The Quest for the Historical Jesus"

"He comes to us as One Unknown, without a name, as of old....he came to those who know him not. He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow me', and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in their fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is'. AMEN

Father, you have come to each of us in the past as a stranger. Help us to recognize you. Open our ears to your voice as it comes to us through the voices of others. And enable us to share and celebrate your presence in the common experiences of our life together. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN